SOME COMMENTS ON THE RHETORIC OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

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In 1981 the Cato Institute commissioned a series of papers on the law and economics of pollution to be presented at a symposium on pollution in Palo Alto, California that December. Certainly one of the most enduring of the many essays written for this conference and eventually appearing in the Institute's journal the following year was that by Murray Rothbard, which examined the nature of property rights from a libertarian prospective and offered a prolegomena to a comprehensive theory of pollution-engendered torts.[1] Rothbard's analysis is predicated on the notion that any legal system consistent with a truly free society bars only those acts that involve either the use of force or the threat of the use of force against a person or his justly acquired property and that "justly acquired property" can, and often does, include a homesteaded easement to pollute in a certain way or to a certain extent.

There are many questions that could benefit from an extrapolation of the conclusions Rothbard drew in this seminal essay. It is therefore particularly unfortunate that he did not have the opportunity to explore these areas further nor did he ever, as far as I am aware, offer a general assessment of the environmental movement itself from the libertarian perspective he so ably put forward in this and earlier papers on property rights and its relation to economic growth. While there is no question that Rothbard would have condemned most of the policy recommendations embraced by the leading environmental groups as inimical to a free society based on private property rights, he nowhere analyzed the rhetoric of the movement in terms of libertarian theory.

The following essay does not pretend to do more than partially fill this gap. It attempts to touch on one aspect of modern environmentalism and to examine it against the backdrop of the values associated with a truly liberal society. What I hope to do is to explore certain traits common to the rhetoric of the environmental movement that I find particularly inimical to rational discourse and that serve only to support untenable and fallacious conclusions and recommendations that, if accepted, would prove devastating to civilization. These center, first, around a profound misuse of the term "rights"; second, around the notion that men in primitive pre-technological societies

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[1] Murray Rothbard, "Law, Property Rights, and Air Pollution," *Cato Journal* II (1982): 55-99. The essay is reprinted in Walter E. Block, ed., *Economics and the Environment: A Reconciliation* (Vancouver, B.C.: The Fraser Institute, 1990): 233-279.

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live in harmony with the environment while modern man is antagonistic and destructive of nature's resources; and, finally, that technology itself is, by its very nature, toxic.

I. Rights

One of the more distasteful features of environmental rhetoric is the terminological confusion with which it is riddled, whereby certain grants of privilege are constantly confused with rights. The rights to which serious political discourse has traditionally referred are negatively conceived and refer to limitations on how governments may act towards their citizens or how citizens may act toward each other. This conception of rights is the one put forward in, among other documents, the Declaration of Independence, the American Bill of Rights and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen.[2] Rights so conceived do not require that others be forced to act in specific ways if I am to exercise my rights but only that they refrain from intervening in certain areas without my consent. Thus, my right to life does not entail that others are obligated to do everything within their power to keep me alive but only that they cannot kill me.

Unfortunately, environmentalists have a tendency to employ the term "rights," not in this negative manner but in its far more vulgar sense, to refer to some privilege that entails that others not refrain from acting, but positively act in certain ways. They are, of course, not alone in this. The last hundred years have witnessed a serious erosion in political discourse as politicians have increasingly invoked such terms as "liberty" and "rights" solely to elicit certain emotional responses in their hearers. This deterioration in political language has reached a point where it is now not uncommon to hear people speak of their "rights" to "higher education," to "quality health care," even to "truth in airline scheduling," and so on.[3] Environmental discourse, far from being immune to such imprecision, has embraced it. And environmentalists, especially those employed as government functionaries of one

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[2] Article IV of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen declares that "liberty consists in the power to do anything that does not injure others; accordingly, the exercise of the natural rights of each man has for its only limits those that secure to the other members of society the enjoyment of these same rights."

[3] Probably the most famous instance of this confusion appears in President Franklin Roosevelt's address to Congress of January 6, 1941. Along side "freedom of speech and expression" and "freedom of worship," Roosevelt listed two new "freedoms," "freedom from want" and "freedom from fear," among the domestic objectives of his third administration.

One of the more spectacular examples of this corruption of political language occurs in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 25 reads: "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age, or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control."

It is testimony to how common this corruption in the language of rights has become that in a recent poll taken in Great Britain on which rights should be enumerated in a proposed bill of rights, the most popular item for inclusion was "the right to hospital treatment on the National Health Service within a reasonable time," which received greater support (88%) than "the right to a fair trial" (82%). "Britain's Constitution," *The Economist*, 21 October-27 October 1995: 66.

kind or another, regularly use the term to refer to privileges which entail an obligation on others to provide certain services. Thus, Principle 1 of the Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held at Stockholm in 1972 declared that "man has the fundamental right to . . . adequate conditions of life in an environment of a quality that permits a life of dignity and well-being."[4] Similarly, the 1987 Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development refers to "the right of individuals to know and have access to current information on the state of the environment" and "the right to participate in decision making on activities likely to have a significant effect on the environment."[5]

Even when the term "rights" is employed by ecologists in what is seemingly its more traditional, negative sense, as, for example, when environmentalists write of "the right to live free from pollutants" it is often so used without any regard to the context in which these rights are situated. When one refers to "the right to a smoke-free environment," as numerous spokesmen of the anti-smoking campaign often do, surely it makes sense to ask "of just whose environment are we speaking?" While I might indeed have such a right to demand of others that they not smoke on my property, have I the same right when it comes to the property of others? But even put in such bald form, the majority of environmentalists would argue that, in most cases, I would indeed have such a right. Such rights obtain, they argue (and in this they are by no means alone), because most private property is not, in reality, private at all, since members of the public (either *all* members of the public, as is the case with, say, a department store, or *certain specific* members of the public, as is the case with a business office) are invited onto the property. By virtue of this fact, nominal private property is transmuted into commonly-owned property, the disposal of which can justifiably be determined by political means. Indeed, most environmentalists have extended this notion of public ownership to the whole of the natural world. They write of the "common heritage of all humanity" and of "sharing the world's resources equitably."[6] It is as if each of us, when born, inherits our *pro rata* share of all the wealth of the world, the land and the oceans of the earth, and all that is on, above, or below it, without regard to the prevailing ownership of these resources. It is apparent that the term "right," as here used, designates something quite different from what is signified in the expressions "right to life," or "right to one's liberty." A "right" to a portion of the world's resources clearly obligates the civil authorities (and the population at large, who ultimately must fund the operations of the civil authorities) to certain positive acts. This is particularly true in this instance since one's "right" is, on examination, not an individual right at all, but rather a "collective" right (if such a perverse notion makes any sense at all) that, by its very nature, can be exercised only by some authority ostensibly representative of the collective.

The language of environmental science is particularly debased when the

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[4] United Nations, *Report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment*, document A/Conf. 48/14/Rev. 1, Chapter 1 (New York: United Nations, 1972).

[5] World Commission on Environment and Development, *Report: Our Common Future*, UNEP/GC.14/13 (New York: United Nations, 1987): 12-20.

[6] For particularly egregious examples of this kind of language, see Dr. Norman Myers, ed., *Gaia: An Atlas of Planet Management* (Anchor Books. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1984).

rights to which environmentalists refer pertain to non-humans. Even so eminent a jurist as William O. Douglas has referred to "the rights of nature,"[7] and this notion has been adopted by a host of other ecologists. These writers, in their attempt to emphasize the physical and biological interdependence of all life, have perverted the language of morals and politics to apply to all of nature, thus undermining all arguments that place man in a unique position with respect to the environment in which he lives.[8] As one ecologist has observed: "Humanity has no extraordinary moral claim or rights over the natural world."[9] Christopher Stone, Professor of Law at the University of Southern California, has proposed that "we give legal rights to forests, oceans, rivers, and other so-called 'natural objects' in the environment—indeed, to the natural environment as a whole."[10] The extension of rights to animals, it is argued, is nothing more than a continuation of the same movement that broadened the notion of rights to encompass all human beings, regardless of color or gender. Thus Peter Singer, one of the founders of the "animal liberation" movement and the person responsible for having first formulated the notion of "speciesism,"[11] writes that "the basic element—the taking into account of the interests of the being, whatever those interests may be—must, according to the principle of equality, be extended to all beings, black or white, masculine or feminine, human or nonhuman."[12, 13]

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[7] Roderick Nash has adopted the term as the title of his book. See *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

[8] As one ecologist has noted: "No one can predict the full consequences of tinkering with any part of an ecosystem. Even the nonliving environment has properties without which life as we know it would be inconceivable." Consequently, the writer continues, "the rights of nature" must be protected by law. Eric Ashby, *Reconciling Man with the Environment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1978): 82-85.

[9] Lynton K. Caldwell, *In Defense of Earth: International Protection of the Biosphere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972): 236.

[10] Christopher D. Stone, "Should Trees Have Standing?—Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects," *Southern California Law Review* XLV (1972): 456. One of the strengths of regarding natural objects as bearers of rights, Stone contends, is that it would reflect a fundamental shift away from the current view that nature exists *for men* (p. 489).

[11] "Speciesism," we are informed, "is a prejudice or attitude of bias toward the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species." "It should be obvious," Singer continues, "that the fundamental objections to racism and sexism made by Thomas Jefferson and Sojourner Truth apply equally to speciesism." Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* (New York: Avon Books, 1977) p. 7. This extended essay grew out of Singer's review of *Animals, Men and Morals*, edited by Stanley and Roslind Godlovitch and John Harris, which appeared in the *New York Review of Books* of April 5, 1973.

At no point does Singer deal with the question of whether, since we hold all human beings more or less responsible for their actions—especially those that violate the rights of other rights-holders—we are to extend this notion of responsibility to animal behavior.

[12] Singer, *Animal Liberation*, p. 6. See also Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

[13] In one of the more ironic perversions of language, one environmental philosopher, commenting on the notion of animal rights, argues that the rights to which animals may lay claim are exclusively negative—presumably John Locke can be credited with laying down the natural rights principles applicable to moose and beavers—while humans, after all, have positive rights as well! In characterizing the rights of animals as distinct from those possessed by humans, Alastair S. Gunn notes:

The "deep ecologists," of which Singer is a less extreme example, propose nothing less than that animals, plants, trees, even minerals, have rights that must be respected lest man violate the moral injunctions ultimately derived from natural law. Indeed, the extension of the ethical universe to such natural phenomena as mountains and rivers,[14] thus closes the circle with the most primitive forms of mysticism.[15] If we were to accept the claims put forward by what, in the movement, are called "the deep ecologists,"[16] that rights extend to all forms of life and, in some instances, to inanimate objects as well,[17] humanity would be frozen into inaction lest it trespass on the prerogatives of nature. What is particularly alarming is that this senseless conclusion, a clear *reductio ad absurdum* to most, is actually espoused by many prominent environmental spokesmen, whose antipathy for all human endeavor is one of the more repugnant aspects of their creed.[18] For these writers human-

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> First, they are . . . primarily negative rights in the case of animals, though not in the case of humans. In a societal context, the "right to life" means far more than merely the right not to be killed. In a welfare state, the right to life is a legitimate claim on behalf of the poor, needy, or enfeebled, to positive action, such as the provision of food and medical treatment, on the part of society. My right to life is not regarded as protected if, although no one actually kills me, I am allowed to die of starvation and disease. (On the other hand, no one has *infringed* my right to life. At most, perhaps, they have failed in their duty to me—perhaps not even that, if I *want* to die, like the hunger strikers in Northern Ireland.) . . . In the case of nonhuman animals, though, I have suggested that human interference is rarely in the interest of animals. There may be exceptions, such as Singer's example of animals trapped in a flooded valley, or domestic animals and pets which we have allowed to become dependent upon us and which are thus our responsibility, but in general the interests of wild animals are best served by humans leaving them alone—their right to life is the negative right not to be killed.

"Traditional Ethics and the Moral Status of Animals," *Environmental Ethics* V (1983): 143.

[14] Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1985): 112. Tom Regan, among others, argues that sentience and consciousness are unnecessary for a thing to have moral standing. "On the Nature and Possibility of an Environmental Ethic," *Environmental Ethics* III (1981): 22.

[15] The extension of "rights" to animals is not new. Luc Ferry, in his excellent study of the environmental movement, discusses the numerous "trials" of animals, among them weevils, leeches, rats, mice, and reptiles, during the Middle Ages and notes that the notion of animals as bearers of rights "is entirely indicative of a premodern, which is to say a *prehumanistic* relationship to the animal kingdom as well as nature in general." *The New Ecological Order*, trans. Carol Volk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995): xiii.

[16] The term apparently originated in the work of its most outspoken defender, Arne Naess. See his "The Shallow and the Deep, Long Range Ecology Movements: A Summary," *Inquiry* XVI (1973): 95-100. See also Naess's *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*, David Rothenberg, trans., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[17] See Jay McDaniel, "Physical Matter as Creative and Sentient," *Environmental Ethics* V (1983): 291-317.

[18] Ferry has laid bare the truly profound implications that the extension of legal rights to nonhumans would bring. It would do no less than mark the end of the humanist era, which traces its inception to the Enlightenment. "And this," Ferry continues, "is the main objective for these new zealots of nature. Its oddities aside . . . the debate on the rights of trees, islands, or rocks is based on no other grounds; it is a matter of determining whether the only legal subject is man, or whether, on the contrary, legal status should extend to what is today called the 'biosphere,' or the 'ecosphere,' formerly known as the 'cosmos.' From every point of view—ethical, legal, or ontological—man would be but one element among others, and [according to

ism is a term of derision,[19] which asserts the superiority of human life over animal and plant life and denies to non-human entities the rights that a properly construed morality dictates they possess.[20]

Lest it be supposed that an ardent emotional attachment to the world of nature is incompatible with an abhorrence for humankind, we would do well to remind ourselves that National Socialism also embraced both a comprehensive ideology and an extensive legislative program for the "protection of nature." Shortly after taking power the Nazi government sought to give legislative voice to the notion that modern capitalist society and its property relationships had uprooted man from his legitimate place in the natural, organic world. Laws aimed at protecting animals[21] and limiting hunting were soon followed by the law of 1 July 1935 for the protection of nature (*Reichsnaturschutzgesetz*). The preamble to the 1935 legislation, setting forth the rationale and intent of Nazi environmental legislation, displays the same romanticization of nature and disdain for the economic achievements of modern society that permeate current environmental literature.

> Today as before, nature, in the forests and the fields, is an object of longing, joy and the means of regeneration for the German people.
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> Our native countryside has been profoundly modified with respect to its original state, its flora has been altered in many ways by the agricultural and foresting industries as well as by the unilateral reallocation of land and a monoculture of conifers. While its natural habitat has been diminishing, a varied fauna that brought vitality to the forests and the fields has been dwindling.
>
> This evolution was often due to economic necessity. Today, a clear awareness has emerged as to the intellectual, but also economic, damages of such an upheaval of the German countryside. . . .
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> The German government of the *Reich* considers it its duty to guarantee our fellow citizens, even the poorest among them, their share in the natural German beauty. It has, therefore, enacted the law of the *Reich* with a view toward protecting nature. . . .[22]

"Protecting nature" was apparently perfectly compatible with a remorseless hatred of certain groups of humans,[23] particularly those, as Luc Ferry has

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the environmentalists] the least sympathetic one at that, being the least *symbiotic* with the harmonious and orderly universe into which he is constantly, by his excess, by his *'hubris,'* introducing the worst disorder." *New Ecological Order*, pp. xix-xx.

[19] See, for example, Christina Hoff, "Kant's Invidious Humanism," *Environmental Ethics* V (1983): 63-70, and Peter Miller, "Animals Have Interests Worthy of Our Moral Interest," *Environmental Ethics* V (1983): 319-333.

[20] See Paul W. Taylor, "The Ethics of Respect for Nature," *Environmental Ethics* III (1981): 197-218.

[21] The legislation was enacted on 24 November 1933. The German Ministry of the Interior later issued a book of over 300 pages providing a detailed analysis and philosophical justification of the statute. See *Das Deutsche Tierschutzrecht: Bestimmungen zum Schutze der Tiere* (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 1939).

[22] Quoted in Ferry, *New Ecological Order*, p. 102.

[23] There is something particularly repugnant about the fact that Himmler, who was a confirmed opponent of the use of agricultural pesticides, oversaw the establishment of a series of experimental organic farms, among them one at Dachau, which were designed to grow organic herbs for use in medicines administered to members of the SS. See Anna Bramwell, *Ecology in*

pointed out, who were not rooted in the community, the "cosmopolites," whose heritage placed them outside the bounds of the social organism and who lacked connection with the soil. Ferry notes that

> . . . the philosophical underpinnings of Nazi legislation often overlap with those developed by deep ecology, and this for a reason that cannot be underestimated; in both cases, we are dealing with a same *romantic and/or sentimental* representation of the relationship between nature and culture, combined with a shared revalorization of the *primitive* state against that of (alleged) civilization.[24]

II. The Myth of the Superiority of Primitive Communities over Technological Societies

Most ecologists, regardless of their other differences, agree that modern industrial society is environmentally destructive and spiritually empty while, on the other hand, pre-technological societies were far more able to live harmoniously with the environment. The mind of pre-technological man, these writers claim, is more attuned to compatible coexistence with the ecosystem than is the individuated, self-regarding mind of modern man. Man in primitive societies identify with the plants and animals around them, hold the land to be sacred, and are true ecologists.[25] Consider the following assertions made by some of the more popular environmental writers:

"For the primal mind there is no break between humans and the rest of nature."[26]

The deification of the earth "appears with such regularity . . . in every preliterate culture, that we may think of it as a basic, almost innate, human perception."[27]

Tribal peoples "all share the affirmation that humans are part of a larger ecological community toward which they have certain responsibilities."[28]

No hard evidence is put forward to support these preposterous claims, which do little more than display the authors' immense ignorance of the complexity and range of differences in values and social structure that mark the huge number of disparate tribal societies.[29]

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the 20th Century: A History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989): 204.

[24] Ferry, *New Ecological Order*, 93.

[25] According to Wallace Kaufman, one-time lobbyist for the Wilderness Society, these are among some of the claims shared by almost all ecologists. See *No Turning Back: Dismantling the Fantasies of Environmental Thinking* (New York: Basic Books, 1994): 56-70.

[26] Devall and Sessions, *Deep Ecology*, p. 97.

[27] Kirkpatrick Sale, *Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1985): 5.

[28] Christopher Manes, *Green Rage: Radical Environmentalism and the Unmaking of Civilization* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1990): 173.

[29] Stanley Diamond provides one of the better examples of the kind of sociological drivel that commonly appears in environmental writing. At one point he writes that "primitive society may be regarded as a system in equilibrium, spinning kaleidoscopically on its axis but at a relatively fixed point. Civilization may be regarded as a system in internal disequilibrium; technology or ideology or social organization are always out of joint with each other—that is

Martin Lewis, himself sympathetic to the goals embraced by the environmental movement, offers these statements as examples of the naive romanticization of primitive society in much ecological literature, which he describes as verging on "intellectual fraud."[30] Lewis advances abundant evidence that claims of this sort, far from having universal application to all primitive societies, in reality describe very few. Severe overhunting and overharvesting were the norm rather than the exception among tribal societies, many of which were highly destructive of nature.[31]

Consider the following example of this fanciful interpretation of pre-industrial society, whose conclusions tend to be embraced by most ecologists and which reflects the increasingly popular idea (fueled by ignorant and simple-minded depictions in the media) that all native Americans regarded the environment with special veneration, with man and nature acting in balance and reciprocity, where the world was seen as a living being and where all living entities were respected. The article from which I quote appears in *Environmental Ethics*, the leading academic environmental journal, in 1990, and the following should give some indication of the conclusions put forward by the authors, Anne Booth and Harvey Jacobs:

> Although they varied significantly between different cultures, Native American relationships with the natural world tended to preserve biological integrity within natural communities, and did so over a significant period of historical time. These cultures engaged in relationships of mutual respect, reciprocity, and caring with an Earth and fellow beings as alive and self conscious as human beings. Such relationships were reflected and perpetuated by cultural elements including religious belief and ceremonial ritual. . . .
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> In contrast, invading Europeans brought with them cultures that practiced relationships of subjugation and domination, even hatred, of European lands. They made little attempt to live *with* their natural communities, but rather altered them wholesale. The impoverishment of the ecological communities of sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe was so great that, in contrast, early settlers of the New World found either a marvelous paradise or a horrendous wilderness, but certainly something completely outside their experience.[32]

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what propels the system along a given track. Our sense of movement, of incompleteness, contributes to the idea of progress. Hence, the idea of progress is generic to civilization. And our idea of primitive society as existing in a state of dynamic equilibrium and as expressive of human and natural rhythms is a logical projection of civilized societies and is in opposition to civilization's actual state." *In Search of the Primitive: A Critique of Civilization* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1974): 172.

[30] Martin W. Lewis, *Green Delusions: An Environmental Critique of Radical Environmentalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992): 55.

[31] Lewis, *Green Delusions*, pp. 59-81.

[32] Anne L. Booth and Harvey M. Jacobs, "Ties That Bind: Native American Beliefs as a Foundation for Environmental Consciousness," *Environmental Ethics* XII (1990): 31.

Booth and Jacobs are by no means alone in espousing the view that the New World was a primeval paradise prior to the arrival of European settlers. In an article that appeared the following year in the same journal, Saroj Chawla argues that, unlike Euro-Canadians and Euro-Americans, who tend to individualize and quantify, the Dene nation (that is, those native Americans of northern Canada) "think holistically and regard self-fulfillment and the

What is particularly significant about this quotation is that the authors' descriptions of both native American and European society, when they mean anything at all, are equally fallacious. What is one to make of such a sweeping characterization as "the impoverishment of the ecological communities of sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe"? What part of Europe? When? Does "impoverishment" refer to economic impoverishment or to a species of undefined "spiritual" impoverishment? Only someone devoid of any knowledge of the social and economic history of Europe over the course of these two hundred years could make such a naive generalization. Are the authors referring to the military vicissitudes of the period (the Thirty Years War and the various peasant uprisings in Germany, the wars of religion in France, Swedish military involvement in central and eastern Europe)? Are they pointing to the severe depression that struck the once flourishing areas of the Italian peninsula? Or to the substantial rural development that occurred in England and the Low Countries? Do the authors mean to refer to the expansion of European-wide trade and the increase of the urban population at the expense of certain rural areas, with the result that between the end of the sixteenth and the middle of the seventeenth centuries, vast tracts of land in western Europe went uncultivated and uninhabited? Or to the fact that these same areas by the middle of the seventeenth century were repopulated and retilled? And what do these disparate economic developments have to do with "ecological communities" and their supposed impoverishment? Finally, there exists not one whit of historical evidence to support the claim that the early European settlers to the New World, most of whom were deeply religious and who regarded the land from which they hailed with a certain veneration, viewed the land which some of them had worked with hatred.

With respect to the authors' portrayal of native American attitudes toward the environment, it is perhaps sufficient to point out that the article footnotes not one serious anthropological study on native American religion nor on the role the land and its resources had in Indian thought. Indeed, one analyst of the ecological movement maintains that if we were to draw inferences about religious beliefs from the behavior of primitive people, we would find that they regarded nature as no more sacred than do Europeans, Americans, or Japanese. Primitive peoples, on the whole, are selfish and wasteful in their use

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development of personal identity in terms of introspective meditation and ritual" ("Linguistic and Philosophical Roots of Our Environmental Crisis," *Environmental Ethics* XIII (1991): 260). "To these tribes," she writes, "human beings and other forms of organic life are one" to be honored and revered (p. 257). So sophisticated is Ms. Chawla's reading of native American anthropology that among the tribes to whom she explicitly refers in this context is the Netsilik, whose reverence for life includes one of the highest female infanticide rates in the world! However, this fact is clearly unimportant when compared to the broader claim that the Netsilik, like other preindustrial societies of the world engage in "rituals and ceremonies which venerate and indirectly protect the environment," while also providing "personal identity and self-fulfillment" (p. 261). For those of European descent, on the other hand, "the well-being of the society is measured in terms of an uninterrupted growth of consumer goods and permanently rising levels of production and consumption" (p. 260), leading to lifestyles that are self-destructive and wasteful of the environment. In light of these comments, it is difficult to resist speculating on just what motivated Ms. Chawla to originally emigrate from India to an industrial-urban society such as Canada rather than to the Australian bush after she completed her M.A. at Delhi University.

of natural resources and possess no real notion of the forces of nature.[33] Some indication of the scholarly merit of Booth and Jacobs' essay can be gleaned from the authors' claim that native Americans viewed all life with benign respect. "Above all else," they write, "Native Americans were, and are, life-affirming; they respected and took pleasure in the life they found around them, in all its diversity, inconsistency, or inconvenience."[34] As Martin Lewis has pointed out, such claims fly in the face of serious anthropological studies of a number of North American tribes, who engaged in the wholesale destruction of wildlife and who routinely burned vast areas in order to facilitate their hunts. Indeed, Lewis maintains that "large areas of the American Midwest were apparently converted from heavy forest to tall-grass prairie under the continual pressure of Indian fire-setting."[35] Finally, anyone even casually acquainted with the views of Plains Indians and those of the Southwest regarding warfare or of the Iroquois toward the treatment of prisoners[36] can hardly take seriously the claim that native Americans consistently "engaged in relationships of mutual respect, reciprocity, and caring" with their fellow human beings. Apparently, Booth and Jacobs are not aware of the fact that infanticide,[37] slavery,[38] and the killing of the aged and sick,[39] were not uncommon practices among aboriginal societies in North America.

There is probably no clearer example of the sloppy scholarship and dearth of careful analysis that pervades much environmental literature than the frequency with which Chief Seattle's words are quoted in support of the view that native American societies live harmoniously and at one with nature while the "white man" does nothing but despoil and rape his natural habitat.[40] Seattle's environmental speech, known among ecologists as the "Fifth Gospel," consists of a collection of mawkish, saccharine comments about the beauties of nature (highlighted by references to "the rustle of insects' wings," and "the lonely cry of the whippoorwill") and man's intimate connection to the natural world. "If men spit upon the ground," Chief Seattle informs us, "they spit on themselves. This we know—the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family. Whatever befalls the earth, befalls the sons of the earth," and so on.[41] While Seattle, chief of the Duwamish, is an actual

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[33] Kaufman, *No Turning Back*, pp. 64-65.
[34] Booth and Jacobs, "Ties That Bind," p. 31.
[35] Lewis, *Green Delusions*, p. 65.
[36] Native American attitudes towards violence and warfare are ably summarized in Harold E. Driver, *Indians of North America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961): 353-384.
[37] Among the Indians of North America, "infanticide was practiced in every culture area." Driver, *Indians of North America*, p. 435.
[38] Slavery was universal among the Indians of the northwest coast, Meso-America, and the Caribbean and was practiced in some areas of Arizona and New Mexico and the southwestern coastal plain. Among the Iroquois, apparently, a slave system never materialized because prisoners of war were generally tortured to death. See Driver, *Indians of North America*, pp. 387-401.
[39] See Driver, *Indians of North America*, pp. 447-448, 454.
[40] Chief Seattle's words are solemnly intoned every Earth Day and quoted in Vice President Al Gore's book on the "environmental crisis," *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992).
[41] Excerpts from the speech appear in, among other sources, Myers, ed., *Gaia: An Atlas*, p. 159.

historical figure,[42] the speech with which he is credited was in fact written in 1972 by a screen writer for a film titled *Home,* made for the Southern Baptist Convention.[43] Yet, despite its origins, the speech is regularly quoted by environmental writers and enlisted in support of the view that primitive societies are environmentally superior to those that are technologically advanced.

Among the charges leveled against modern society, of which primitive societies alone are guiltless, is the institution of private ownership of property. Capitalist institutions particularly contribute to the despoliation of nature and its fragile resources.[44] Doubtless it is for this reason that environmentalism quickly became popular among so many Marxists, who eagerly embraced the ecological movement's glorification of a fictitious primitive communalism.[45] Research undertaken by these eco-socialists has discovered, for example, that before Western colonization, "third world" populations stood in ecological balance with their environment, where "harmony with nature was a feature of their lifestyles"[46] and that 'poverty' as it is known today was almost unknown in pre-colonial Africa.[47]

In the minds of many environmentalists, purely ecological concerns have merged with a distaste for the "environmental imperialism" of modern society, whose economic engine is the free market and production for profit. And the industrialism that invariably accompanies an advanced capitalist economy inevitably comes at the expense of the many. "Industrialism," we are told, "is perhaps the greatest pyramid scheme in history," shifting the costs of production onto "the poor, the unwary, or the next generation."[48] The attempt to dominate nature is intimately associated with the domination of other human beings, which, far from being a ubiquitous feature of man's nature, is a hallmark of capitalist production. Thus, Murray Bookchin informs us that

> the notion that man is destined to dominate nature is by no means a

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[42] Seattle apparently made his reputation by slaughtering other Indians. See Kaufman, *No Turning Back*, p. 59.

[43] Rudolf Kaiser, "'A Fifth Gospel, Almost': Chief Seattle's Speech(es): American Origins and European Reception," in Christian F. Feest, ed., *Indians and Europe: An Interdisciplinary Collection of Essays* (Aachen: Rader Verlag, 1987): 505-526.

[44] One leading Marxist environmentalist has recently warned that only the replacement of a market system by a centrally-planned economy can save the planet, since capitalism is "*inherently* environmentally unfriendly." "Capitalism," we are informed, "continues to degrade ecosystems and create social injustice. The 1992 Earth Summit demonstrated that the powerful vested interests behind Western capitalism have no intention of radically changing their goals and methods to help create an environmentally sound or socially just global society." David Pepper, *Eco-Socialism: From Deep Ecology to Social Justice* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993): i [The quotation, for some bizarre reason, appears on the page preceding the title page.]

[45] See, for example, James Ridgeway, *The Politics of Ecology* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1970) and Barry Weisberg, *Beyond Repair: The Ecology of Capitalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).

[46] Michael R. Redclift, "Redefining the Environmental 'Crisis' in the South," in Joe Weston, ed., *Red and Green: a New Politics of the Environment* (London: Pluto Press, 1986): 80-101.

[47] M. Omo-Fadaka, "Communalism: the Moral Factor in African Development," in R. Ronald Engel and Joan Gibb Engel, eds., *Ethics of Environment and Development: Global Challenge, International Response* (London: Belhaven, 1990): 180.

[48] Christopher Manes, *Green Rage,* p. 228.

> universal feature of human culture. If anything, this notion is almost completely alien to the outlook of so called primitive or preliterate communities. I cannot emphasize too strongly that the concept emerged very gradually from a broader social development: the increasing domination of human by human. Perhaps only by examining the attitudes of certain preliterate peoples can we gauge the extent to which domination shapes the most intimate thoughts and the most minute actions of the individual today.[49]

III. The Claim that Modern Industrial Society is, by its very Nature, Toxic

At the risk of treating a subject with which many students of the ecological movement are familiar, I should like to touch on what I regard as the most pernicious aspect of modern environmental rhetoric, the contention that the technology associated with modern civilization brings in its wake an unending stream of catastrophes, ranging from the despoliation of the natural habitat and the depletion of the world's resources to the dehumanization of man himself.[50] Among the cataclysms that are certain to befall us within the next few years unless we are prepared to undergo monumental alterations to our economic system and to the values by which we live are (1) global famine on an unprecedented scale; (2) the depletion of stratospheric ozone, with a resultant increase in ultraviolet radiation, which will bring in its wake an epidemic of skin cancer and the destruction of the earth's ecosystem; (3) the permanent devastation of the land, sea, and air through pollution; and, (4) global warming as a consequence of the emission of CO_2 and other greenhouse gases.[51] Yet, despite these scenarios of imminent doom associated with industrial society, none is more pervasive than the view that technology has spawned a vast

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[49] Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Palo Alto, Cal.: Cheshire, 1982): 43.

[50] These doomsday scenarios are both catalogued and evaluated in some depth in the Competitive Enterprise Institute's excellent analysis of the ecological movement's concerns about environmental degradation. See Ronald Bailey, ed., *The True State of the Planet* (New York: The Free Press, 1995).

[51] It is interesting that predictions regarding global warming follow by only a few years earlier predictions by ecologists that the earth was cooling at an alarming rate as a consequence of industrial emissions of dust particulates (aerosols) into the atmosphere (the effect of which was to reflect sunlight back into space). Ronald Bailey quotes Stephen Schneider, an atmospheric scientist at the National Center for Atmospheric Research as having warned in 1971 that, should the amount of aerosol emissions increase by a factor of four, this "could decrease the mean surface temperature by as much as 3.5K degrees. If sustained over a period of several years, such a temperature decrease could be sufficient to trigger an ice age" (I. S. Rasool and Stephen Schneider, "Atmospheric Carbon Dioxide and Aerosols: Effects of Large Increases on Global Climate," *Science* [July 9, 1971]: 138, quoted in Ronald Bailey, *Eco-Scam: The False Prophets of Ecological Apocalypse* [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993]: 80). And, five years later, one eminent scientist warned that "the threat of a new ice age must now stand alongside nuclear war as a likely source of wholesale death and misery for mankind" (Nigel Calder, "In the Grip of a New Ice Age," *International Wildlife*, July, 1975, quoted in Dixy Lee Ray and Lou Guzzo, *Environmental Overkill: Whatever Happened to Common Sense?* [Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1993]: 15).

and increasing number of chemical compounds that are hazardous to human health. This conclusion is shared not only by spokesmen for the environmental movement but appears to have captured the imagination of the media and the public.

The apocalyptic vision of a chemical armageddon was first put forward by Rachel Carson in 1962.[52] In *Silent Spring*, Ms. Carson claimed that the American food supply was being poisoned by highly toxic pesticides and preservatives that were contaminating the whole food chain. So influential was Ms. Carson's book, according to one historian, that it played a crucial role in passage of the Toxic Substances Control Act in 1976.[53] Since the publication of her book, literally thousands (if not tens of thousands) of books, articles, and monographs have appeared warning of the carcinogenic nature of countless substances, many in everyday use. Indeed, in 1977, Professor Thomas Corbett of the University of Michigan, a noted expert on the relation between chemicals and cancer, went so far as to claim that fully eighty percent of all human cancers were the product of manmade chemical pollutants.[54] Since that time more and more people, including politicians who hold positions of great authority (not the least of whom is the Vice President) have joined the chorus of those claiming that the products of industrial technology were poisonous to humans and were inexorably destroying the global ecosystem. In this they have had the support of a massive and ever-growing bureaucracy, whose very *raison d'être* is to indict as many industrial substances as possible as causes of human disease.

There is no epidemiological confirmation whatever for this view.[55] Rather, supposedly predictive studies done on laboratory animals form the basis of the evidence supporting the conclusion that a vast array of substances are carcinogenic. Yet, despite the claims made by government regulators and seized upon by environmentalists as unequivocal confirmation of the evils of technological society. such tests are, by their nature, seriously flawed and prove very little beyond what statistical model was employed in arriving at the results. As an example, using the same animal data but differing statistical models, it was possible to arrive at differences in the carcinogenic effects of saccharin that vary by some five million times.[56] In addition, there are a

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[52] *Silent Spring* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1962). I am indebted to Edith Efron's excellent study of the environmental movement's contentions regarding human health, *The Apocalyptics: Cancer and the Big Lie* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984) for the early history of environmental health claims.

[53] Efron, *The Apocalyptics*, p. 33.

[54] Thomas H. Corbett, M.D., *Cancer and Chemicals* (Chicago; Nelson-Hall, 1977): 7, quoted in Efron, *The Apocalyptics*, p. 70.

[55] The rationale for the view that it would be foolhardy to wait for hard epidemiological data before determining the carcinogenic nature of a particular substance was put forward succinctly by David Rall, Director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences in a CBS interview with Lesley Stahl on "The Politics of Cancer" in 1976. Mr. Rall noted that "if we don't accept the mice and rat data, you only have one alternative, and that's letting the human population be exposed for about 25 years and if in fact the compound was carcinogenic you can have a small epidemic of chemical carcinogenesis in man after that 25 years." Quoted in Efron, *The Apocalyptics*, p. 75.

[56] National Academy of Sciences, *Saccharin: Technical Assessment of Risks and Benefits*. National Research Council, Committee for Study on Saccharin and Food Safety Policy (Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Sciences, 1978): 72 and 61ff, quoted in Aaron

number of other significant problems with live bioassays themselves that reflect on their value as predictive of potential carcinogenesis in humans. First of all, there is some question that chemicals that have been shown to be carcinogenic in laboratory animals are indeed carcinogenic in humans. Scientists have established that this is often true, but by no means always. Second, these bioassays assume that all tumors discovered in laboratory animals, whether benign or malignant, will, in man, become malignant.

Finally, and most important, the nature of the tests themselves are unconvincing since they rely on the effects of the administration of huge doses of a substance on a necessarily small number of laboratory animals. The results of these tests are then translated, employing a straight linear method, into the effects of lower dosages. Thus, if dosage *x* is found to cause one tumor in every one hundred laboratory rats, it is assumed that dosages of one-hundredth *x* (*x/100*) will result in one malignancy in every ten thousand humans. But this principle of extrapolating the effects of lower dosages neglects to address the whole question of the dose-response threshold for human beings and further assumes that there are no substances for which no threshold in humans exists at all. The choice of this model, it is argued, since it is the most conservative, at least acts on the side of safety. But by so doing, the tests themselves become worthless inasmuch as they in no way serve to describe actual risk to humans.[57] As Aaron Wildavsky has pointed out, it is senseless to divide all chemicals into those that are "cancer causing" or those that are not, without any reference to dosage.[58] To categorize substances in this way, especially given the huge number of potentially "carcinogenic" substances that occur naturally, is not only scientifically worthless but leaves the erroneous impression that it is possible to insulate the population from even the most minute doses of any chemical that, in some quantity, might prove harmful. Indeed, this absurd standard[59] has actually been proposed as the principle that should govern *all* legislation in this area[60] and is embraced by many environmental-

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Wildavsky, "Toxic Torts: Is There any There 'There'?" in Ronald Hamowy and Richard Stroup, eds., *Hazardous to Your Health: Toxics, Torts and Environmental Bureaucracy* (forthcoming).

[57] The Environmental Protection Agency itself concedes this point. See Elizabeth L. Anderson and the Carcinogen Assessment Group of the United States Environmental Protection Agency, "Quantitative Approaches in Use to Assess Cancer Risk," *Risk Analysis* III (1983): 281, where the authors conclude that "the linear non-threshold model has been used by the EPA to place plausible upper bounds on risk, not to establish risk."

[58] Waldavsky, "Toxic Torts: Is There any There 'There'?"

[59] This principle of "zero tolerance" underlies the Delaney Clause of 1959, by which the FDA is charged with preventing *any* substance whatever found to be carcinogenic in animal tests from being used as a food additive.

[60] The Ad Hoc Committee on the Evaluation of Low Levels of Environmental Carcinogens in 1970 made the following recommendation to the Surgeon General: "The principle of zero tolerance for carcinogenic exposures should be retained in all areas of legislation presently covered by it and should be extended to cover other exposures as well. Only in the case where contamination of an environmental source by a carcinogen has been proven to be unavoidable should exception be made to the principle of zero tolerance. Exceptions should be made only after the most extraordinary justification, including extensive documentation of chemical and biological analyses and a specific statement of the estimated risk for man, are presented. All efforts should be made to reduce the level of contamination to the minimum. Periodic review of the degree of contamination and the estimated risk should be made mandatory" (Report to the Surgeon General, United States Public Health Service, April 22, 1970, Ad Hoc Committee on

ists as the only one consistent with a safe environment.

Despite the anti-technological bias implicit in such regulatory agencies as the Environmental Protection Agency, the Food and Drug Administration, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and the Consumer Product Safety Commission, who are all charged with protecting the public and the environment from any potentially harmful industrial intrusion, there remain some "deep ecologists" who condemn their findings as the product of a scientific worldview which is intimately related to the very technology they despise. Thus, Andrew Dobson regards "the modern scientific project" as "a universalizing project of reduction, fragmentation, and violent control." And Bill Devall condemns the "experts on nature" who have "killed their positive feelings of identification" with the natural environment and likens those whose concern is ostensibly to protect the environment from the predations of civilization with "the guards in Nazi death camps."[61]

What is so disturbing about the rhetoric of environmentalism is that it almost consistently displays an ignorance and simple-mindedness that is breathtaking. After all, environmental problems are, at bottom, economic problems. They have reference to the production and distribution of wealth, which is the subject-matter of economic science. Clean air, clean water, the preservation of wilderness and of species, indeed, all environmental concerns, including the amount and rate of use of natural resources and the size of the human population, are all issues amenable to economic analysis. Yet most ecologists have only the most perverted notions concerning the application of economics to environmental issues.[62] Their writings tend to consist in the main of highly questionable scientific assertions[63] and slovenly philosophical

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the Evaluation of Low Levels of Environmental Chemical Carcinogens, National Cancer Institute, *Evaluation of Environmental Carcinogens*, Exhibit 10, in "Chemicals and the Future of Man," Hearings before the Subcommittee on Executive Reorganization and Government Research of the Committee on Government Operations, United States Senate, Ninety-second Congress, First Session, April 6 and 7, 1971, p. 181, quoted in Efron, *The Apocalyptics*, p. 92).

[61] Andrew Dobson, *Green Political Thought* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990): 198; and Bill Devall, *Simple in Means, Rich in Ends: Practicing Deep Ecology* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1988): 48-49. Both quotations appear in Lewis, *Green Delusions*, pp. 124-125.

[62] Indeed, many environmentalists hold economics in contempt because economic science is anthropocentric and oblivious to the notion of "meaning" in nature. Equally important, economics reduces environmental concerns to issues of costs and benefits. As one "environmental ethicist" has noted: "Environmental activists believe that an environmental policy based on purely economic reasoning results in the destruction, rather than the protection, of nature." Bryan G. Norton, "Thoreau's Insect Analogies: Or, Why Environmentalists Hate Mainstream Economics," *Environmental Ethics* XIII (1991): 248. See also Mark Sagoff, "Some Problems with Environmental Economics," *Environmental Ethics* X (1988): 55-74.

The scorn for economic science reaches its apotheosis in the work of Hazel Henderson, whose monograph on *The Politics of the Solar Age: Alternatives to Economics* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1981), is nothing more than a collection of ignorant ramblings and disjointed and incoherent arguments.

[63] Environmental literature is suffused with an embarrassingly large number of examples of pseudo-science, much of which has been ably rebutted in a host of monographs. In addition to those already cited, see Kenneth R. Foster, David E. Bernstein, and Peter W. Huber, eds., *Phantom Risk: Scientific Interference and the Law* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993); Dixy Lee Ray, *Trashing the Planet: How Science Can Help Us Deal with Acid Rain, Depletion of the*

contentions that are reducible to private and purely arbitrary value judgments. Yet the environmental movement has been successful in capturing the interest and concern of countless people in the industrialized world. It has done this, I think, because ecologists have managed to gull the public into believing that their conclusions regarding the earth and its resources is uniquely disinterested and selfless. Doubtless this in part accounts for their use of such terms as "this planet" or "spaceship Earth," which suggest to many a perspective of cosmic objectivity, unsullied by private concerns. Yet, at bottom, many, far too many, environmentalists share their questionable sensibilities to the needs of the natural world with a petty disdain for human beings; hence such comments as those of Dave Foreman, the founder of Earth First!, who has observed that "we are a cancer on nature" and that "man is no more important than any other species," or those of the "Reverend" Thomas Berry, who has proclaimed that "we are an affliction of the world, its demonic presence. We are the violators of Earth's most sacred aspects."[64] What many environmentalists hope for is nothing less than the destruction of the institutions and artifacts associated with civilized life and a return to some primeval existence akin to some post-nuclear nightmare. Thus Edward Abbey writes that

> the military-industrial state will disappear from the surface of the Earth within fifty years. That belief is the basis of my inherent optimism, the source of my hope for the coming restoration of a higher civilization: scattered human populations modest in number that live by fishing, hunting, food-gathering, small-scale farming and ranching, that assemble once a year in the ruins of abandoned cities for great festivals of moral, spiritual, artistic and intellectual renewal— a people for whom the wilderness is not a playground but their natural and native home.[65]

While these statements are particularly dramatic, there is a strong element of contempt for humankind and of the history of human achievements in almost all environmental literature, and this, I would suggest, deprives it of any

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Ozone, and Nuclear Waste (among Other Things) (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1990); Julian Simon, *The Ultimate Resource* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); Julian Simon and Herman Kahn, eds., *The Resourceful Earth: A Response to Global 2000* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1984); and Ben Wattenberg, *The Good News Is the Bad News Is Wrong* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

[64] The quotations from Dave Foreman and Thomas Berry appear in Bailey, *Eco-Scam*, p. 10. See also the ravings of Chellis Glendinning and especially her "Notes toward a Neo-Luddite Manifesto," *Utne Reader*, March-April, 1990: 50-53. Ms. Glendinning calls for the dismantling of all nuclear, chemical, video, electromagnetic, and computer technologies and sees in capitalism the cause of most of mankind's current mental and physical ills. Her *When Technology Wounds: The Human Consequences of Progress* (New York: William Morrow, 1990) is a monument to the pathological manifestations of the environmental movement.

[65] Edward Abbey, "A Response to Schmookler on Anarchy," *Earth First!*, 1 August 1986: 22, quoted in Christopher Manes, *Green Rage*, p. 241. Manes himself longs for "a world in which everything is wilderness." "This ectopian vision," we are told, "seems remote from the environmental politics of our day, mystical, atavistic, even threatening. And yet the human race was born into just such a world. It was our home for uncounted millennia. It is still the world of dwindling populations of primal people. It is where we learned the values of community, art, creativity, curiosity. That we should be more comfortable now with the artificial industrial landscape of modern time, with its imperatives of competition, exploitation, and selfish consumption, suggests how successful civilization has been in demonizing nature" (p. 240).

moral standing, which, given its other failings, is its only remaining claim to be taken seriously.